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BN information chiefs play pivotal roles

IMPROVE: They must revise and do more in their approach to be more effective

A She carefully realigned his side-parted hairstyle before meeting journalists for interviews, Datuk Ahmad Maslan would often straighten his shirt's crisp collars with the tips of his fingers.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) information chief probably does not own a round-neck T-shirt or at least, does not want to be seen wearing one judging from a casual observation of him habitually caressing those starched flaps; he favours formal clothing.

It is not wrong to say that the 49 year old is always prepared to look good before the media. Perhaps, Ahmad was just doing his job as an information chief, whose capacity has often been perceived to include the role of a public relations officer.

Undoubtedly, information chiefs are leaders in the front line when it comes to providing a respectable image for their respective parties.

And now the aftermath of the recently-concluded general election has brought forth a herculean task for BN information heads as they journey into another term with a slightly reduced majority.

An endless stream of farcical allegations against the coalition of rigging the electoral system had stifled BN's proactive efforts to generate trust among the public, including those who are not even old enough to vote but young enough to rally.

But have the information chiefs been significantly effective in their tasks?

One of the points raised by Universiti Utara Malaysia's Dr Muhammad Fuad Othman was that some information chiefs have yet to master the tailoring of messages to suit their targeted demographic, which could make thin of the political endorsement sought.

Muhammad explained that in relaying information, one must take

into consideration the audience's level of intellect, age, creed and to a certain extent the timing of the message being made public.

He stressed that the main task of any information chief was to disseminate information and knowledge to the masses.

"For example, the reality on the ground is that (some) from the middle-income group felt detached from the government following the disbursement of the 1Malaysia People's Aid financial assistance.

"This can, or has resulted in a vote swing. In hindering such perception, the information chiefs can play a larger role by creating awareness on the other benefits enjoyed by this middle-income group," said the political scientist.

This writer opines that fresh substance in their speeches can definitely boost the effectiveness of the propaganda — sans the shady connotation of the term — spread. Repetitive contents can be a chore for even a diehard supporter to listen to during a ceramah.

What the people want to know are issues relatable to their daily goings-on; national issues can be sensational but at the end of the day, one may wonder whether the potholes have been filled or the clogged drains cleared.

In the same context, information chiefs must be on the ground to better understand the people's sentiments as the cliched battle "to win the hearts and minds of the people" is very real, and covers each and every aspect of their demands.

Touching base with political issues in certain localities for instance could provide better input for information chiefs on the people's needs.

As of now it seems that immaculately ironed shirts and diplomatic dispositions just do not cut it anymore, if the messages were not effectively relayed to or inculcated among the masses.

Associate Professor Dr Mohd Adnan Hashim concurred that such an approach must be carried out as the task ahead was certainly daunting due to the political landscape.

"The information chiefs must make full engagement with the people (pro-opposition included), whether by meeting them (face to face) or in the social media. They must spend more time on the ground (for a long-term benefit)."

The specific approach to the younger generation especially, must be refined to make the party acceptable at all levels of the youth segment. In the long run, it is possible to create a sense of attachment, belonging and ultimately loyalty.

Adnan described the youth as a crucial reservoir in ensuring a continuity of support for any party. In listing out his suggestions, Adnan however noted at the same time, it was a job not to be solely assigned to the information chiefs.

The communications and media studies expert said other than having the rank and file to act as "party representatives" to help spread information, a credible and capable team must be set up to assist their respective information chiefs.

"A case in point is the fabricated information being circulated on the social media such as Facebook and Twitter. People nowadays are somehow inclined to believe in unverified facts.

"A team of 'gatekeepers' must be quick in their response to counter any allegations and come out with the right facts and figures or maybe, take a leaf from the strategy employed by their rivals (and beat them at their own game)," said Adnan who is also the Malacca Universiti Teknologi Mara rector.

This is one of the toughest terms yet for the BN, as the ruling coalition is also embarking on another five-year campaign since 2008 when it first experienced a bittersweet victory following the unprecedented losses of states.

With Pakatan Rakyat rousing its supporters for rallies to kick-start an early campaigning period for the 14th general election, the information chiefs should be one step further to offset the opposition's advance.

Their involvement to ensure the coalition's political survival and dominance will be pivotal in mitigating the opposition pact's onslaught.

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